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REVIEW AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CONCLUDING DOCUMENT OF THE TWELFTH SPECIAL SESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY: REGIONAL CONFIDENCE-BUILDING MEASURES

Report of the Secretary-General

I. INTRODUCTION

1. By its resolution 51/46 C of 10 December 1996, the General Assembly reaffirmed its support for efforts aimed at promoting confidence-building measures at regional and subregional levels in order to ease tensions and conflicts in Central Africa and to further arms restraint and the peaceful settlement of disputes in that subregion. To that end, the Assembly, affirming its support for the programme of work of the Standing Advisory Committee on Security Questions in Central Africa, requested the Secretary-General to continue to provide assistance to the States members of the Committee and to report to it at its fifty-second session on the implementation of the resolution. The present report focuses on the activities of the Standing Advisory Committee since the submission, on 14 August 1996, of the Secretary-General's previous report to the Assembly at its fifty-first session (A/51/287).

2. As the people of Central Africa continued to pay a terrible price for political instability and conflict during the reporting period, I was encouraged by a growing readiness and determination by Central African States themselves to intensify their efforts with a view to preventing further turmoil in their subregion and promoting sustainable peace.

3. Recognizing that lasting peace in their area could not be imposed from outside, Central African countries increasingly consulted with each other and

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participated in several efforts at various levels to address the threats to peace and security in the subregion.

4. The United Nations has followed and supported those efforts. On 2 and 3 December 1996, Heads of State and Government of States members of the Standing Advisory Committee held an extraordinary summit meeting at Brazzaville to examine the persistent crises in the Great Lakes region of Central Africa, and especially in Zaire* (see S/1996/1006, annex). Mr. Alioune Blondin Beye, Special Representative of the Secretary-General in Angola, represented my predecessor at that meeting.

5. During my first official mission to Africa shortly after taking office as Secretary-General, I attended the summit meeting of the Central Organ of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution, which took place at Lomé on 26 March 1997 to tackle the crisis in Zaire. I called for peaceful negotiations and dialogue and stressed the need for a firm commitment to lasting peace and reconstruction based on democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights. I also sent my Special Representative for the Great Lakes, Mr. Mohamed Sahnoun, to Libreville to represent me at a regional summit organized there on 8 May 1997 by President El Hadj Omar Bongo, to pursue a peaceful political solution to the Zairian crisis.

6. Meanwhile, I met in New York on 12 February 1997 with Mr. Destin-Arsène Tsaty-Boungou, Foreign Minister of the Congo, who, in his capacity as President of the Bureau of the Standing Advisory Committee, briefed me on the Committee's work programme, including in particular plans to convene a subregional conference on the theme "Democratic institutions and peace in Central Africa". I supported the initiative, seeing it as a useful opportunity to promote respect for the rule of law in Central African countries and thus contribute to stability in the subregion. That conference, initially scheduled to take place at Brazzaville from 20 to 25 April 1997, was eventually postponed to a future date to be set by the Committee's Bureau, owing to the critical situation at that time in neighbouring Zaire.

7. Furthermore, in response to an invitation from the Government of Gabon, I asked Mr. Sahnoun to represent me at the Committee's ninth ministerial meeting, which was held at Libreville from 7 to 11 July 1997, and to deliver a statement on my behalf. At that meeting, which was chaired by Mr. Paulin Obame Nguema, Prime Minister and Head of Government of Gabon, the Standing Advisory Committee elected new members for its Bureau as follows: President, Gabon; First Vice-President, Angola; Second Vice-President, Chad; and Rapporteur, Burundi. The Secretariat continued to provide substantive and organizational support for the various activities of the Committee, including the December 1996 Brazzaville summit and the July 1997 Libreville ministerial meeting.

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* By a communication dated 20 May 1997, the Secretariat was informed by the Member State known formerly as "Zaire" that the name of the State had been changed on 17 May to "the Democratic Republic of the Congo".

II. PROCEEDINGS OF THE COMMITTEE'S MINISTERIAL MEETING IN 1997

8. Concern over persistent tensions and hostilities in the subregion, and especially over the ongoing conflict in the Congo and the peace process in the Central African Republic, dominated the Committee's ninth ministerial meeting. Ten of the Committee's 11 member States participated in the meeting; Rwanda was absent.

9. While deploring the fact that violence had continued to spread in the area as demonstrated by the outbreak, in June 1997, of armed hostilities in Brazzaville, participants nevertheless welcomed what they saw as positive and encouraging improvements in a number of other Central African States. In that connection, they specifically welcomed the fact that calm had returned to the Democratic Republic of the Congo and that the embargo on Burundi had been partially lifted. The meeting also called for the total elimination of sanctions on Burundi and for United Nations peace operations to be set up in the Congo and in the Central African Republic to help resolve the conflict situations there.

10. In addition to examining effective ways and means to resolve existing crises, delegates discussed in detail how to prevent conflicts from starting in the first place. They stressed the view that prevention was more effective, more attainable and significantly less costly than attempting to manage or resolve crises once they had degenerated into armed confrontations. They therefore called for concrete action to establish and to ensure the effective functioning, at the earliest possible date, of the early warning mechanism for Central Africa which the Heads of State and Government, at their July and December 1996 summit meetings at Yaoundé and Brazzaville, respectively, had decided to set up under the auspices of the Standing Advisory Committee.

11. The ministerial meeting also called for effective action against illicit arms transfers and circulation in Central Africa as a way of helping to prevent outbreaks of armed conflicts in the subregion. Delegates stressed, in that connection, that in addition to controlling weapons, attention should be paid to reducing the armed forces. In that regard, they urged international support for programmes initiated by Central African States themselves to retrain demobilized fighters in order to help ensure their smooth reintegration into civilian life.

12. Once again, participants recognized the usefulness of effective confidence-building measures among Central African States in the field of security as a means of enhancing inter-State cooperation deemed vital for meaningful progress for sustainable peace and stability in the subregion. They appealed to all States members of the Committee to sign the Non-Aggression Pact and to respect fully its provisions. They also agreed that regular meetings between their senior military and security officials, as well as joint military exercises and patrols and participation in subregional or regional peace operations, would help not only to tackle specific concerns such as controlling the illicit trade in arms and drugs and helping to resolve specific conflicts, but also to enhance overall transparency and confidence among Central African States.

13. Participants reiterated the view that while the primary responsibility for resolving the subregion's political and security problems rested with their respective countries, support from the international community as a whole would help to ensure lasting success for various peace efforts. Against that background, participants exchanged views with the representatives of four permanent members of the Security Council on ways and means of strengthening cooperation between the Council and Central African States in the maintenance of peace and security in the subregion. The permanent members had been invited to the ninth ministerial meeting by the host Government.

14. At the meeting, the representatives of four of the permanent members of the Security Council (the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland did not send a representative) stressed, in particular, the importance of preventive efforts to avert future armed conflicts in the subregion and outlined measures and programmes their countries had initiated to support peace efforts in Central Africa. In that connection, France and the United States of America informed participants of a programme launched jointly with the United Kingdom to strengthen the capacity of African States to participate more effectively in peace operations in the region.

15. States members of the Committee appealed to the international community to support the Committee's various efforts to enhance stability in the subregion, including, in particular, their initiative to establish at Libreville a subregional early warning mechanism aimed at preventing future armed conflicts in Central Africa.

III. PROGRAMMES AND ACTIVITIES FOR 1997/98 REQUIRING VOLUNTARY CONTRIBUTIONS

16. The Committee, at its ninth ministerial meeting, agreed to carry out a number of programmes and activities for the remainder of 1997 and into early 1998. (See A/52/283-S/1997/644, annex, for the full report of the ninth ministerial meeting of the United Nations Standing Advisory Committee on Security Questions in Central Africa). Those activities would be funded from voluntary contributions. It is to be recalled that at the request of the General Assembly the Secretary-General, in March 1996, established a trust fund within the Secretariat to receive contributions which Member States and intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations might wish to make in support of the programme of work of the Standing Advisory Committee. The specific programmes and activities adopted by the Committee for 1997/98 include the following:

(a) Establishment and functioning of an early warning mechanism for Central Africa (Committee members have decided to set up the mechanism at the earliest opportunity, if possible before the end of 1997, at Libreville);

(b) Launching of programmes for the retraining and reintegration of demobilized troops into civilian life;

(c) Controlling the illicit trade in arms and drugs in the subregion;

(d) Organization of training seminars to enhance the capacity of Central African States to participate in peace operations (the first such seminar for Central African States, organized with funding from the Government of Japan, was held at Yaoundé in September 1996);

(e) Organization of joint military exercises for peace operations;

(f) Organizing seminars and sensitization programmes on good governance, the rule of law and respect for human rights for military and security personnel of Central African States;

(g) Convening a subregional conference on the theme "Democratic institutions and peace in Central Africa" (the Government of Equatorial Guinea has offered to host the conference, which, depending upon the availability of voluntary contributions, is scheduled to take place in December 1997).

IV. ADMINISTRATIVE AND FINANCIAL ASPECTS

17. Member States will recall that from the outset, the Committee held two annual ministerial meetings, funded from the regular budget, to implement activities contained in its programme of work. However, owing to the financial crisis, the Committee held only one annual meeting each during 1996 and 1997. At the Committee's ninth ministerial meeting, member States called for the reinstatement of the two annual ministerial meetings to meet the growing need for discussions and other efforts to address the persistent crises in the subregion.

18. I wish to take this opportunity to express the gratitude and appreciation of the United Nations to those States that have contributed to the Trust Fund of the Committee and to appeal once again to all States as well as to intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations to continue and indeed to increase their support for the Committee's valuable efforts to promote confidence and stability in the volatile Central African subregion. I would also like to thank the Government of Gabon for the important contribution it made in facilitating the smooth convening at Libreville of the ninth ministerial meeting.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND OBSERVATIONS

19. Central Africa remains an area of much turbulence and suffering. But it is also one of the continent's most richly endowed subregions, with a vibrant population that yearns for a better life. Yet that goal can be realized only in a climate of lasting peace, which in turn depends on the will of the States and the people of the subregion.

20. In the period under review, the international community welcomed the return of stability to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which has enormous implications for broader subregional peace and progress. But that was offset by the eruption of political violence in the neighbouring Republic of the Congo, where the situation remains unstable despite untiring international mediation

efforts led by President Bongo with the joint United Nations/OAU Special Envoy, Mr. Sahnoun.

21. Despite the setback in Brazzaville and persistent tensions in the Great Lakes region and in a number of other Central African States, I applaud the efforts of Central African States to find peaceful solutions to their region's crises and to strengthen both internal and inter-State harmony on the basis of good governance, the rule of law and mutual respect. While outside assistance can help, there is no substitute for determined action by those most directly concerned.

22. The activities of the Standing Advisory Committee in 1997 demonstrated once again the value of having such a mechanism. The agreements reached by Committee members to set up a subregional early warning mechanism, to control the illicit trade in arms and drugs, to retrain demobilized troops for civilian life and to enhance the capacity of Central African States to participate more effectively in future peace missions in the area would, if implemented, contribute significantly to continuing efforts to end the scourge of violence, destruction and suffering in the subregion. I also welcome the growing attention that those countries are paying to issues of participatory democracy and respect for human rights and the rule of law as part of a strategy for durable peace.

23. The General Assembly has, from the outset, strongly supported the Committee's efforts. The Committee is a forum for dialogue and confidence-building in an extremely volatile area. It has shown a great sense of responsibility and seriousness in the manner in which it has handled sensitive and delicate issues and challenges. It should continue to receive the support and encouragement of the international community. I appeal, in this connection, to member States and the international community as a whole to contribute generously to the United Nations Trust Fund set up to help implement the Committee's programme of work. It would be sad indeed if the important confidence-building measures agreed by the Committee were to be left unimplemented because of lack of funds.